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If President Bush is looking for support for his proposed changes to the Social Security system, he shouldn't come to the Five Star Senior Center.

About 100 people at a town hall meeting March 29 at the center at 2832 Arsenal St. made it clear that they didn't care for the changes the president seeks.

"We don't want to run the risk of investing or privatizing," said one senior citizen who stood up at the meeting.

"Let's leave Social Security where it is," said another senior citizen who spoke up.

The meeting was held by U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-3rd District, who made it clear that he thought the president's proposal would bring disaster.

"It would be a horrific breach of trust to dismantle the Social Security system that people have paid in for all these years," Carnahan said.

"It has safeguarded seniors' economic independence and security all this time," Carnahan said.

Before Social Security, half of senior citizens lived below the poverty level, Carnahan said. Now only 10 percent are below the poverty line, he said.

Under the president's proposals, people could choose to have some of the money they pay into the system diverted into private accounts that would be placed into conservative investments.

"I really think that is the wrong way to go," Carnahan said. "It would decrease the guaranteed benefit of Social Security by as much as 40 percent."

The president's plan would add trillions of dollars to the national debt, Carnahan said.

"Your money would be subject to the risks and uncertainties of the stock market," Carnahan said.

"The system is sound and it can pay all benefits for all beneficiaries for about the next 50 years," Carnahan said. After that, it will have enough money to pay 80 percent of benefits. "That's not a system that's bankrupt."

With minor changes, the system can be made solvent for longer, Carnahan said.

The president and his supporters say that Social Security will start paying out more than it brings in in payroll taxes in 2018.

"What we need to do is look at Social Security for what it was intended," Carnahan said. That is as the basis of a retirement program. "Look at private accounts on top of and in addition to the Social Security system."

Carnahan urged people to make their views known by writing their representatives in Washington, D.C.

"The privatization train that just started out of the station with a full head of steam is slowing down," Carnahan said.

Senior citizens interviewed after the meeting said they weren't pleased with the president's plan.

"I think Mr. Carnahan has a good idea the way he wants to fight it and I think we all should go home and write letters," said Kay Orzada, 62. "I think (the president's proposal) is terrible and we should all get rid of it. Contact everybody and have 'em kick it out. There shouldn't be privatization."

"I don't like what the president's proposing. I want to keep it just the way it is," said Jeanette Dowd, 76.

Dowd said her own experience makes private accounts suspect.

"I thought my husband and I were very well situated because we worked and saved and invested in things," Dowd said. "And now it's all gone. I'm not getting the return on my money that I thought I would get because the market went down so bad. And I don't think the people need to go through this, what I'm going through."